EIGHT SIMPLE RULES...

To Resolving Conflict and Improving Relationships

by

Greg Giesen

“The most difficult relationships will be the most profound transformation.”

-Evan Hodkins

www.leadinefromwithin.net
ABOUT GREG GIESEN

Greg Giesen is the manager of people development at the University of Denver where he provides professional development and organizational development services for faculty and staff. With a Master’s degree in Personnel Services and Counseling from Miami University, Greg brings over thirty years of experience in corporate consulting, training, facilitation and conflict mediation. In addition, Greg has been an adjunct graduate school professor at DU for over fifteen years and is the author of three books on Creating Authenticity, including his latest, Mondays At 3: A Story for Managers Learning to Lead. He also has been leading and facilitating his award-winning program, Leading From Within, for over eighteen years.

EIGHT SIMPLE RULES

To Resolving Conflict and Improving Relationships

Managing conflict with coworkers doesn’t have to be difficult. Below are eight simple rules that should both help you deal with conflict and improve your relationships at work.

Rule 1: Begin with the end in mind
Our approach going into conflicting situations will greatly impact the outcome. The more you are focused on a specific goal/outcome, the better able you’ll be to stay true to your task.

Rule 2: Stay off the ladder
It is to our advantage, not to mention to the relationship in question, that we seek out all the facts, information and perspectives from all parties involved in a potential conflict before forming any opinions or taking any action.

Rule 3: Choose your style
We need to think about the other person in the conflict and select an approach (or style) that can best create win-win outcomes. Our “auto-pilot” response to conflict may not always be the best approach in every situation or with every relationship.

Rule 4: Take the initiative
Conflict is not about who’s right or wrong; who’s more at fault, or who should be the first one to apologize to the other. The truth is, if the conflict is bothering us, then it is ours to resolve. Waiting for the other party to come to us first doesn’t help us address the problem; it only prolongs it.
Rule 5: Focus “out” before focusing “in”
Focusing “out” means understanding the other party’s point of view before expressing our own. Why does this matter? Because it puts the other person at ease knowing that their concerns have been heard and validated. When people feel listened to and acknowledged, they relax and lower their defenses. This not only helps ease the conversation, but increases the likelihood that the other party will be more willing to hear our side of the story.

Rule 6: Ask for what you need
There is more to conflict than an issue or disagreement. In most cases, there is an underlying need that is not being met or recognized. In order to fully resolve a conflict, we need to first identify the need that’s not being met and then negotiate from there.

Rule 7: Manage the how and the what
Successfully managing conflict means having the ability not only to bring an issue to resolution but also to do it in a respectful, collaborative manner with the other party. In fact, with just a little preparation, you can ease the whole experience and set yourself and the other party up for success.

Rule 8: Empower the third side
In a conflict, there’s our side, there’s your side, and there’s the “third side.” According to William Ury, author of Getting to Peace, the third side in a conflict is all the people who are directly and indirectly impacted by someone else’s conflict. Although many third-siders see themselves as innocent bystanders, they actually have a tremendous influence on establishing a work environment that either supports constructive and functional conflict resolution or reinforces dysfunctional and destructive conflict resolution.

“Whenever you’re in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. The factor is ATTITUDE.” -William James
Rule 1: Begin with the End in Mind

Mediator: Before we begin today’s mediation, I’d like to ask each of you to share what your desired outcome is for today’s meeting. Bob, why don’t you go first.

Bob: Okay. I guess I’d like to walk out of here with a better understanding of how to communicate better with Jerry.

Mediator: Bob, can you be more specific.

Bob: Sure. Jerry and I have been butting heads a lot lately and I don’t know what I’m doing that’s triggering him so much.

Mediator: So you want to know if you are bothering Jerry when you talk to him and, if so, how to make that different.

Bob: Yes.

Mediator: And Jerry, what’s your desired outcome?

Jerry: Frankly, I just want Bob to leave me alone. Just let me do my job.

Mediator: Jerry, let me ask you this...Is it the way Bob approaches you or the frequency that’s the issue for you?

Jerry: The frequency. Bob is an okay guy...(Mediator interrupts)

Mediator: Can you say that to Bob.

Jerry: Bob, you’re an okay guy. I just need you to leave me alone to do my job. You interrupt me all the time and I can’t get my work done.

Mediator: So a desired outcome for you Jerry is to get more uninterrupted time from Bob.

Jerry: Yes.

And the mediation goes on...

What the dialogue above demonstrates is Rule 1: Begin with the End in Mind.
In my opinion, we are more effective in conflict when we are prepared, focused on a desired outcome, and have a plan. Granted not all conflicts allow us the luxury to do all three but I would argue that those types of conflict require a much different strategy anyway. Let’s focus on the ongoing difficult relationship first.

Very simply, we are better negotiators when we know what we want and have a strategy on how to get it. When we are goal-focused in even the most challenging of challenging situations, we are less distracted by everything else that often prevents us from a successful resolution (i.e., personality differences, disposition—ours and theirs, group dynamics, and even the immediate surrounding environment). We are also better able to lead with our thoughts and not our emotions. This is how we need to be in conflicting situations.

When I mediate a conflict between two people, I include a coaching session with each person prior to the actual mediation. The purpose of this added step is three-fold. First, I help both parties identify a desired outcome and a win-win strategy for the mediation session. Second, I establish a level of trust between the parties and myself. Since part of my job is to create a safe space for the mediation, it is essential that I’m trusted as a mediator, facilitator, and coach. Third, by taking upfront time to prepare for the mediation, both parties are ready to hit the ground running the moment we walk into the room. That’s because we are all focused on outcomes.

I want to mention here that I’m not advocating for a third-party mediator to help resolve a conflict. I believe there is a time and place when a third-party should be considered but only as a last resort strategy. What I am advocating for is taking the time to focus on desired outcomes before engaging in a conflicting dynamic with another person. Lead with the head and not the heart.

But what about those “in-the-moment” conflicts that don’t allow for any kind of preparation, you ask?

Have a Plan B...an escape route. As mentioned, we don’t do conflict well when we aren’t prepared. What’s the point of getting caught up in a conflict or interpersonal argument when all we are going to do is get mad, defensive, emotional, and ultimately damaging the relationship at hand. My advice—don’t engage! If it’s a stranger—avoid, leave, or let it go. If it is a colleague, friend or family member—postpone the discussion. You can decide later on how to proceed or even if you need to.

There is one more influencing factor to consider when we talk about Rule # 1: Begin with the End in Mind.

Let me ask you this:
When you think about the word conflict, does it bring up more negative or positive connotations and why?

When you reflect on your own past conflicts, would you say that you generally handled them effectively, ineffectively, or avoided them like the plague?

You see, our past experiences with conflict form our present day auto-pilot response. In other words, if our overriding perception of conflict is negative, we’ll be more likely to avoid it, deny it, mismanage it, sit on it, resist it, or project it onto the other person. And we’ll do this without much thought. This is because we associate conflict as a threat and automatically go into self-protective mode...which, by the way, isn’t necessarily an effective response to the situation at hand.

Conversely, if we have had relative good past experiences with conflict, we’ll be more inclined to resolve it, encourage it, address it, move past it, and bring it out in the open. As a result, our auto-pilot response is more around resolution and collaboration.

What does this all mean?

It means that if we have a pre-disposition to view conflict as negative, our ability to focus on outcomes is even more important. In other words, there will be a constant pull towards old patterns if we fail to keep our eye on the goal.

Case in point: My auto-pilot response to conflict is to internalize it. I have a tendency to go inside my head where I proceed to analyze the problem to death. Sometimes I find a resolution and sometimes I end up doing nothing. Either way, I don’t always involve the other person in this process. Sometimes they don’t even know I’ve resolved the issue. Can you see how that could be problematic?

In my case, internalizing conflict won’t help me if I value and want to maintain a relationship with the person I’m in conflict with. Hence, I need to be mindful of my tendency and stay focus on outcomes in order to steer the resolution in a win-win direction.

So, in conclusion, Begin with the End in Mind means:

- Preparing ahead of time
- Identifying a desired outcome prior to engagement
- Seeking win-win resolutions where both parties benefit
- Visualizing a positive conversation beforehand and setting a positive intent
- Overriding all auto-responses that don’t serve you in the moment
Walking away from conflicts that don’t matter or involve people you don’t have a relationship with or are emotionally packed, thus preventing you from being focused on outcomes
Rule 2: Stay Off the Ladder

Have you ever been cut-off by a driver on the highway and then instantly gave them some feedback?

Have you ever said something to someone that you didn’t mean?

Have you ever misjudged someone only to find out later that you were wrong?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, congratulations! You may not know it but you have already climbed the Ladder of Inference.

The Ladder of Inference comes from Peter Senge’s book, “The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook”, where Senge uses the ladder as a metaphor to talk about how we create beliefs based on false assumptions. Allow me to explain using my tweaked version of Senge’s model (created with permission).
Let’s take the example of giving some instant feedback to the guy who just cut you off on the highway...

Here’s essentially what you did, starting from the bottom of the ladder and moving up:

1. While driving, you focused-in on a specific incident at a specific moment (*What are you doing!*)
2. You made a quick assumption about the other driver (*You idiot!*)
3. You drew a conclusion based on your assumption (*Why don’t you go back to Driver’s Ed and learn to drive!*)
4. You formed a belief about the driver (*Ah, out of town plates...that explains it!*)
5. And, if that wasn’t enough, you took an action (*Take that!* as you waved your fist at the driver while passing him)

In the above example, you went from the bottom of the ladder to the top in less than two seconds.

See the problem?

The quicker we go up the ladder (from assumptions to action), the less control we have over outcomes. Let’s break this down.

The problem with racing up the ladder towards action is:

- The more emotion we have, the faster we climb the ladder. The faster we climb the ladder, the less control we have on the outcome. The less control we have on the outcome, the more out-of-hand the conflict can get.

- We do not live in a *stimulus—response* world. Nobody makes us feel a certain way. Nobody causes us to respond in a particular manner. Nobody is responsible for our actions but us. When we immediately respond to a stimulus (i.e., being
cut off on the road), we have removed the thought-process from the situation and allowed our emotions to take over. This leads to a stimulus—response mindset where we get to blame somebody or something for our response. Not good.

In truth, there’s actually a three steps process that takes place, not two: There is Step-1) an activating event (stimulus); Step-2) our assessment of the activating event (going up or down the ladder), and Step-3) our response. In other words, Step-1 did not cause Step-3...Step-2 caused Step-3; and Step-2 is about us not about them!

The good news here is that when we are mindful of our movement up the ladder, we get to stop the process before any action is taken. We get to regain control in the moment and choose to respond from a logical place. Or to put it another way, we get to begin the process of climbing down the ladder.

There is also an important missing piece when we go up the ladder. Do you know what it is?

It’s the other side of the story. It’s understanding why someone did what they did. It’s getting all the information before choosing a response.

You see, the Ladder of Inference is a one-sided process. It allows us to play judge and jury over someone else’s actions and make a conviction without ever hearing the other side. The obvious upside is that we get to be right. The unfortunate downside is that it’s not a fair process. It’s not fair to the other party nor is it fair to us.

The key here is to:

• Turn a primarily unconscious process into a conscious process.
• Not respond to an activating event without first having all the facts.
• Catch ourselves going up the ladder and coach ourselves back down the ladder.
• Slow down all stimulus-response behavior patterns where we currently have little to no control over how we respond to a particular triggering event. By simply not responding automatically, we introduce thought into the process.
• Always give the benefit of doubt in situations or with people where we do not have all the information on what’s going on. After all, wouldn’t you want someone else to give you the same respect?

A buddy of mine who is Ladder of Inference-savvy came up to me one day and said, “You mentioned something yesterday that confused me and I found myself going up the ladder. Instead of doing that, I wanted to just come out and ask you directly.”
When I heard my buddy say that to me, I respected him even more than I already did. He not only took responsibility for his interpretation of what I said but he stopped short of taking any kind of action without first speaking to me to get more clarification.

Guess what the majority of issues are that I mediate between two people?

Misperceptions. That’s right, misperceptions of a past action or behavior that slowly turned into an assumption, conclusion, belief, and action. I literally have to break down a past situation with the conflicting parties so that both perspectives are shared with each other. Then and only then can resolution take place.

Guess where gossip fits into the Ladder of Inference?

That’s right. One person climbs the ladder about someone or something and ends up sharing their perception with another and then another. Before long everyone has a version of the story but no one has the whole story. That’s gossip.

Lastly, there’s the bypass on the Ladder of Inference. The bypass essentially means that our beliefs about someone or something are so strong that any new data to the contrary will be disregarded in order to preserve our beliefs about them.
Here’s an example why the bypass is so dangerous. A couple that my wife (now ex-wife) and I used to invite over had a tendency to cancel at the last minute on a fairly frequent basis. In fact, it happened so regularly that we had a bypass going on about their ability to keep a commitment. Sure enough, the night before we were supposed to get together the phone rang and the Caller-ID showed it was from them. Upon seeing their name, I gave my wife a knowing glance and proceeded to shake my head in disappointment as I answered the call.

“Hello.”

Greg, this is Ray.”

“Ray, how nice to hear from you,” I said sarcastically, knowing what was coming next.

“Bad news...we are not going to be able to make it over tomorrow.”

Looking over at my wife I point to the phone to indicate that they’re doing it again.

“Oh, that’s terrible. Is everything okay?” I asked, not really interested in hearing yet another excuse.

“Jenny’s parents are coming into town tomorrow.”

And you schedule this knowing we were supposed to get together, I thought. “Okay, we’ll maybe next time,” knowing that there probably wouldn’t be a next time.

A couple days later I found out the rest of the story...Jen had been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. Her parents were coming into town to be with her.

I felt terrible. I was so certain (the bypass) that I was right about our friends that I didn’t leave any room for other options.

The bypass prevents relationships or situation from being different. The bypass prevents change. The bypass is a blockage of sorts, much like a clogged artery.

If you have a bypass and it is with a person that matters to you, then break it down and change the relationship. Bypasses protect us but they do nothing for the betterment of a relationship or a situation. We essentially become frozen in time.

There are people out there right now that have bypasses with us and we don’t even know it. Likewise, we have bypasses with other people and they don’t know it either.

I don’t know about you but I’d rather people in my life not have bypasses with me. I want to believe that I can change and that I value every relationship I have. Don’t you?
So that’s Rule-2 in a nutshell: *Stay Off the Ladder*. So stay off the ladder!
Rule 3: Choose Your Style

(A conversation during a recent coaching session)

Me: Tom, how are things going with Nancy?

Tom: Well...not that great actually.

Me: What do you mean? Last time we talked you were all excited about dating her.

Tom: I know, but things have changed. She’s blown me off.

Me: Wait, weren’t you just with her a week ago? What happened?

Tom: She just stopped communicating. She was supposed to call me on Monday and never called. On Tuesday she was going over to a mutual friend of ours and we were going to get together later that night and she blew me off then as well. No call...no text...no email. Zero! Nada!

Me: So what did you do?

Tom: Since we had planned to go out to a fancy restaurant for New Year’s, I texted her in the morning and asked if we were still going. And guess what? No response yet again. Can you believe it? So I cancelled our reservations and told her so in a text.

Me: So why didn’t you just call her?

Tom: I had already called earlier in the week with no luck. What do you think; I’m a glutton for punishment!

Me: Okay, so I’m assuming she didn’t respond to your latest text either.

Tom: Correct; that is until today. And get this...she said she had an unexpected out-of-town guest show up and hadn’t looked at her cell phone for the past three days. She said she was sorry we missed our dinner.

Me: How did that make you feel?

Tom: Like I’m an idiot! Come on Geese, I wasn’t born yesterday. Does she sound like someone who is interested in developing a relationship with me to you? Didn’t check her cell phone for three days! Come on! This is a woman who is attached to her phone. She lives on her Facebook app.
Me: So, is it over?

Tom: It is for me.

Me: Are you going to tell her?

Tom: Why should I? She’s the one who stopped communicating with me. What would be the point?

Me: What do you gain by not communicating?

Tom: She gets some of her own medicine. Let’s see how she likes it!

Me: So, part of the non-communication for you is to retaliate?

Tom: You just don’t treat people that way Geese.

Me: Who are you talking about Tom, you or her?

Tom: She started it. She disrespected me first. That’s not right.

Me: I only bring it up because it seemed like you really cared for her.

Tom: Never again. Burn me once, shame on you...burn me twice...shame on me.

Me: Is shutting off communication a trigger for you?

Tom: Yes. My mother would stop talking to me when she was upset. It drove me crazy.

Me: What did you do then?

Tom: I shut down too. We’d play this game of not talking to each other. It sometimes went on for days.

Me: How would it end?

Tom: Eventually one of us would slowly start talking to the other. In most cases she’d be the one to break the silence.

Me: Why not you?
Tom: Because I was mad at her for shutting down communication and wanted to punish her by not giving in.

Me: Sounds similar to what you are doing with Nancy.

Tom: I guess so.

Me: So, would it be fair to say that you’re an “avoider” when it comes to conflict?

Tom: Not always. But it’s probably what I do when I’m really upset with someone.

Me: But when you do that, doesn’t it actually prolong the conflict? You’ve already mentioned that shutting down communication is a trigger for you. In essence, you extend the pain; extend the uncomfortableness; extend the awkwardness, and extend the conflict from being resolved.

Tom: (being funny) Yeah, so what’s your point?

Me: Would you say that the pattern of shutting down or avoiding communication around a conflicting issue has caused more harm than good for you in the long run?

Tom: Probably.

Me: Probably?

Tom: Okay, yes it has Dr. Phil.

Me: I’m just trying to help here. So, what other options exist in these situations?

Tom: I guess I could assert myself instead of always reacting and responding to the other person.

Me: Ah, that would be a different approach. By always reacting to their response, you end up giving them all the power in the relationship dynamic. Can you see that?

Tom: I can now.

Me: But by being assertive and talking on the issue, you not only take the power back but you get to end the conflict instead of dragging it out for days at a time.

Tom: Point made. Maybe it comes down to self-respect. I need to respect myself first.
Me: Exactly. By standing up for yourself you are truly respecting yourself. You’re also changing the pattern that you’ve used for years and thereby changing the dynamic of your relationships. All of that by choosing to respond differently when triggered.

Tom: But what if it doesn’t work?

Me: If you stay consistent around it, people will eventually accept the new you. If you are erratic and only sometimes assert yourself, you’ll be sending mixed messages and then it could very well backfire. Consistency is the key.

Tom: You want me to call Nancy, don’t you!

Me: Why wait to change the pattern.

The above true story introduces the concept of Rule 3: Choose Your Style. When I explain this concept in the classroom, I introduce the five different Thomas Kilmann Conflict Styles (Avoiding, Accommodating, Compromising, Collaborating and Forcing) and have the class self-select which style is their “go-to” style under most circumstances.

My intent in this article is merely to emphasize the importance of choosing the most appropriate style for the conflict at hand as opposed to being the style. What do I mean? The key to any conflict resolution process is to separate ourselves from the conflict. When we are attached to the conflict, like Tom was in the scenario above, our egos, hurt feelings, and self-protectiveness quickly take over and move us in the opposite direction from resolution. Tom’s relationship with Nancy didn’t have to be over. His decision was based on emotion and hurt feelings not on logic. Tom got so caught up in the dynamics that he lost sight of the options that were available to him. As a result, he didn’t choose a conflict style but instead slipped into his “go-to” style or “default” style of avoidance. Granted, avoidance may have been the most comfortable style for him but clearly not the most effective. Tom had an opportunity to change an ineffective pattern from his past but instead reinforced it by giving in to it.

A colleague of mine said it best: We have a bow and a quiver with five arrows at our disposal at any given time. Each arrow represents one of the five conflict styles. When in a conflict, we need to keep our eye on the bull’s-eye (the desired outcome) and choose the arrow which will get us there most accurately.

If we don’t choose an arrow, our default arrow becomes our arrow of choice. The problem is that our default arrow has more to do with familiarity and self-protection than conflict resolution. More often than not, it isn’t our
best choice.

The same goes for each of the five conflict styles. There is an appropriate and inappropriate use of each individual style. Avoiding is an effective response to conflict when some guy cuts you off on the highway. Why? Because you have no investment in having a relationship with him and it would be dangerous to escalate a conflict that could lead to an accident. However, using avoiding as a mechanism to shut down communication with a person you care for is conversely not an effective use of that style. This is why it is so important to step back from the conflict and choose a style that will lead to a desired outcome.

If you are not familiar with the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Styles, go to http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/ to learn more. There are also many YouTube videos on the model as well. Either way, it is important to know which of the five conflict styles is your default style so you can override it in circumstances where one of the other styles might be more appropriate. Just having that awareness can make all the difference. Make sense?
Rule 4: Take the Initiative

...In the event of a loss of cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will drop from above. Tighten the mask by pulling on the straps like this. If you are traveling with a child, place your mask on first before assisting them...

Whenever I hear that part of the flight attendant’s preflight spiel, I always smile. I smile because my gut instinct would be to place the mask on a child first—had I not repetitively heard that directive. But I get the idea—save yourself so you can save others!

The same principle applies to Rule 4 of my Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict called, Take the Initiative. You see, too often we lose ourselves in the dynamics of a conflict and end up taking on much more of the burden than needed. We do this when we get frustrated with someone and end up cutting off communication...or we get angry with someone and retaliate...or we get caught up in being right and refuse to hear the other party’s perspective...or we refuse to forgive someone who wronged us until we get a proper apology.

In each of the examples above, we are essentially giving away our power to the other person by reacting and responding to them instead of focusing on ourselves and what we need. In essence, we are putting the proverbial oxygen mask on them before us. See the difference?

Who, but our ego, really cares about who started the conflict or who should apologize first or who’s right and who’s wrong? When this happens, we’ve lost our focus and have gotten caught up in the insignificant nuances which, more times than not, lead to a stalemate of sorts.

Let me give you an example. A couple of months ago I was introduced to an insurance broker who agreed to help me obtain a new health insurance plan. He was a nice guy and initially very helpful...that is until I ended up getting rejected by the insurance company (reason: I was labeled a high risk because I actually used my previous insurance when I got my physical).
Suddenly our relationship seemed to change as he stopped using the “we” pronoun and suggested “I” appeal the decision on my own. I have not heard from him since. No help, no advice, no plan B, nothing. It felt like I was left for road kill.

Now as I saw it, I had two options. I could either be angry, hold a grudge, and retaliate by seeking out a new broker...or I could initiate contact with my current broker and focus on what I need (i.e., guidance, advice, and a commitment to help me now).

Granted I wanted to give him a piece of my mind about his client-relationship skills (or lack-there-of), but how was that going to help me get my needs met? If anything, it would create more unwanted tension, strife and distraction...the last thing I needed. As a result, I called him and we quickly got back on the same page with no damage to the relationship.

When we **Take the Initiative** to resolve a conflict:
- We get our own needs met
- We hold the other party accountable by bringing the conversation to them
- We release the burden of holding grudges, stress, or pent-up emotions
- We role model effective conflict resolution
- We effectively manage our relationship with the other person

When we don’t take the initiative, the opposite is true as well. Our needs don’t get met; there is no accountability with the other party; anger and frustration fester; we role model ineffective conflict resolution, and we’ve enabled a dysfunctional relationship.

Not good.

The key is to know what you want (Rule 1), let go of judgments and assumptions that can get in the way (Rule 2), choose an approach that will get you to resolution (Rule 3) and initiate conversation (Rule 4) so you get what you need. And guess what? You’ll improve the relationship with the other party in the process.
Rule 5: Focus Out Before Focusing In

“I need a volunteer...Greg?”

*Wow, that felt more like telling than asking,* I thought. “Sure Ron, I’d be glad to volunteer.”

Ron asked me to stand in front of the group as he approached. I knew he picked me for a reason but wasn’t quite sure why...that is until his hands hit my chest with such force that I stumbled back a couple of steps.

“What are you doing?” I yelled, trying to regain my composure.

“What do you think?” he said, as he wound up again for a second attack.

My classmates were in shock. Their eyes glued on Ron, trying to determine if they should watch the frontal assault or intervene somehow.

I braced myself.

*WHAM!* With both hands he struck my chest again. “What did you say?” he screamed.

Clearly Ron was trying to unravel me. I was determined not to engage. I smiled, “I didn’t say anything Ron.”

He lunged at me again and then again. Each time I took a step back and absorbed the blow. I pictured being Gumby and relaxed my body with each punch. He got angrier and angrier.

“Stop it!” yelled Mary, one of my classmates.

The tension is the room was intense...at least for everyone but me. Ron continued to attack and I continued to step back and absorb. Finally, out of exhaustion, he stopped and shook his head. “You asshole.”
We all laughed, including Ron.

**The Lesson**
The confrontation above was Ron’s way of teaching by example. He was my graduate school professor and we were talking about conflict in class. He picked me as his subject primarily because I had not shown any vulnerability in class as of yet and he wanted to demonstrate how easily it would be for any one of us to get emotionally drawn into a confrontation...only it didn’t work.

Shhhh! Just between you and me...I probably would have gotten upset with Ron and overtly resisted his attack had I not been on display in front of my classmates. Because I was so aware that I was “on stage” per se, I found it fairly easy to maintain self-control throughout his aborted demonstration by focusing on him rather than me. This helped me better anticipate, absorb, and diffuse what was coming next. It is also the premise behind **Rule 5: Focus Out Before Focusing In**.

Conflict resolution is not about winning. It is not about being right. It is about finding win-win agreements and enhancing relationships. *Focusing out before focusing in* is essentially mental Aikido where the objective is to dance with the other party’s energy instead of exerting our own. In other words, it’s about focusing on understanding the problem completely from their side before trying to assert our side. Or, as the late, great Stephen Covey would say, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

![image](image)

And here’s the best part...we already have the skill set needed to do this. It’s listening. That’s right; I’m talking about the ability to listen from a place of curiosity, sincerity, and openness as opposed to listening from a place of judgment, contempt, and defensiveness.

The easiest way to diffuse an angry person is by showing them that we care about them as a person and their concerns equally. We do this by respectfully listening and asking questions to ensure that we fully understand what’s going on for them. When people feel heard...when people feel validated...when people feel cared for...their anger dissipates and their defenses soften. More importantly, they begin to feel connected to us and want to reciprocate by understanding our perspective.
It’s that simple and it’s that difficult.

I was speaking at a workshop when a woman in the audience took offense to something I said. She angrily rose from her seat and began to verbally attack me. Shocked, I could tell immediately that this was more of a misunderstanding than anything else. However, instead of interrupting her, arguing with her, or telling her she misunderstood, I took the time to listen and paraphrase back to her what I heard her saying. She looked up at me, somewhat surprised, and said, “Yes, that’s it.” I then apologized for my delivery and explained what I had meant to say. She smiled and thanked me to clarifying.

Did you see what I did?

This was no different than how I responded to Ron pushing me around the room. Instead of protecting myself through defending or resisting the attack (in this case a verbal assault), I focused out and listened to her words and calmly paraphrased them back to show understanding. I diffused the attack, just like I was able to do with Ron.

John Heider, author of *The Tao of Leadership* once told me to imagine seeing the words *TEACH ME* sitting above the head of every person that I have any conflict with as a way of reminding me to focus out before focusing in.

- *Teach me* what’s upsetting you and why?
- *Teach me* how I may have contributed to the problem and what I can do to fix it.
- *Teach me* how to work with you so that we can collaborate better.
- *Teach me...Teach me...Teach me...*

And it worked!
Rule 6: Ask for What You Need

I had a love-hate relationship with my old boss. The love part was my incredible respect for this former Olympic gold medalist turned CEO of one of the leading professional development companies in the world. He was one of those people who could make an audience laugh, cry, and get inspired—all at the same time. People always came up to me after one of Terry’s amazing speeches to say how lucky I was to work for this man. I’d smile and say, “I sure am”, knowing I was lying through my teeth.

In hindsight, it was awfully ironic. Here we were, a company best known for our leadership development programs and materials, and yet we didn’t practice a lick of it within our own company. We were a walking contradiction. Do as we say...not as we do!

Here’s the hate part. Our CEO, Terry, ran the organization with an iron fist. It was the classic parent-child dynamics...and I’m talking about the relationship between Terry and his managers, of which I was the newest. He was a short man who sat behind a very large desk. In fact, his desk was so large that he’d literally be looking down at you as you sat in one of the two little chairs out in front. I can’t remember, did I emphasize the parent-child dynamics? Anyway, you could sum up his management style with these three words: command-and-control. But wait, I’m just getting started.

Whenever Terry wanted to see you, he wanted to see you NOW...not in ten minutes, not when you have time...but NOW! And since he was a man of few words, he’d never tell you why he wanted to see you. As a result, you didn’t know if you were in trouble or if you would be expected to summarize something from one of your past reports that he’s just now getting to. Instead, all you got was, “Can you come down to my office!” It wasn’t a question, but rather a demand...and it was agonizing for me.

And to add insult to injury, his office was on the opposite side of the building, in its own wing no less. The laborious walk over involved ambling down an assortment of long hallways, like an unending maze, until you’d eventually pop out right in front of his old and grouchy secretary who seemed to never know you were coming. “What do you want?” she’d say, without looking up. You get the idea.
The part that still baffles me to this day is how all the other managers seemed okay with Terry’s abrupt and controlling style. In fact, they seemed to almost welcome the dysfunction, enabling it whenever possible. In hindsight, I think Terry’s ineptness provided comic relief for them. And get this, every Friday all of us managers would sneak out to lunch (we didn’t want Terry to know we were getting together) and meet up at a local pub where we’d take turns sharing Terry-stories over beers (keep in mind this was over twenty years ago).

Unlike my peers, the Terry-bashing every Friday at lunch didn’t alleviate or justify his behavior. I still struggled with it and one Friday decided to bring it up at lunch. “I just don’t think it is right,” I’d say, “And he needs to know that we can’t always come running every time he needs something.”

The other managers laughed. “Are you serious?” they’d say. “The last guy to take on Terry was immediately shown the door,” as they all nodded together.

*So much for their support,* I mumbled to myself.

As the weeks went by, my resolve to change my relationship with Terry increased with every *Can you come down here* phone call. I thought and thought and thought. I knew that his sense of urgency and abruptness was an annoyance for me, but there had to be something else. Why was he making me so mad?

And then it came to me...
It wasn’t the immediacy factor and it wasn’t the rudeness...it was not knowing what he wanted that was killing me. You see, Terry never took the time to set a context for his requests. He preferred to wait until you were standing in front of him before he’d explain himself. I often felt very incompetent walking down to his office, wondering what he was going to throw at me. Not an efficient use of anyone’s time in my opinion. Plus, I’d usually end up having to run back and forth to my office to get information or a file that I didn’t know I needed.

So, I’ve identified the root of the problem...now what?

This is where Rule 6: Ask for What You Need comes in. I needed Terry to change his behavior just enough so I could not only get my needs met (i.e., my need to feel competent) but to also have greater efficiency when we do meet. And truthfully, all he would have to do was take an extra few seconds to explain why he needed to see me before hanging up the phone. That’s not asking too much, is it?

The key to asking for what you need with your boss is to make it a mutually beneficial request, causing your boss to want to change. A request, I might add, that is stated in a positive way, making it almost impossible to be turned down. Some call this managing up...and they are correct. It’s the same thing.

But isn’t this a form of manipulation, you ask?

Yes and no. Yes in that you are purposely crafting your words to solicit a desired response, but No in that you are simply asking for what you need. What we are talking about here is diplomacy. Instead of criticizing your boss, you turn whatever need is not being met into a request. The end-results are the same...your boss changes his/her behavior and you get your needs met. The best part is that you didn’t upset your boss in the process. How cool is that?

So, here’s how it went down

At the end of our next weekly one-on-one meeting I said, “Terry, there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?” he said.
“You know what would be helpful to me?”

“What’s that?” he said (again).

“When you need me ASAP, do you mind taking a second or two to tell me what it’s concerning? That way I can be more prepared and not have to waste your time by running back and forth to my office.”

He smiled, “Sure.”

I did a double-take. Sure! That’s it! You mean to tell me I’ve spend all these months agonizing over this and that’s all you have to say!

But it worked! Not only that, that request gave me permission to gently remind Terry of our agreement the few times he forgot later on.

So, the next time you are either in a conflict and/or have needs not being met in a relationship, your first obligation is to simply ask in a respectful way for what you need. In preparation, answer these questions:

1. What need of yours is not being met?
2. What is the impact of that need not being met?
3. What do you need differently?
4. What would that look like?

Now put this in the form of a request, making sure you include how the other person will benefit by this as well.
Rule 7: Manage the **How** and the **What** will Take Care of Itself

There are two components to every argument/conflict. There’s the conflicting issue (the **what**) and there’s the interpersonal dynamics during the conflict (the **how**). Guess which one is most important?

That’s right, the **how**.

Very simply, how you **do** conflict will directly impact the outcome of the conflict itself. If you are kind, respectful, constructively assertive and focused on win-win outcomes, you’ll get one kind of results. If you are mean, rude, aggressive, and focused on being right, you’ll get an entirely different kind of results.

The **how** sets up the **what**. Failure to effectively manage the **how** means all bets are off as to the success of the confrontation/conflict. When you focus on the issue without any attention to the interpersonal dynamics, you are asking for a fight; a fight that could do some serious long-term damage to your spouse, partner, colleague or friend.

*Okay, you say, but what if it’s just the clerk at the store?*

No difference. It’s still a relationship.

Think about it. How would you want to be treated if someone confronted you? Would you want them to be respectful or hard charging and in your face?

It’s not complicated. Manage the **how** and the **what** will take care of itself. Here are some initial suggestions for managing the **how**:

- Begin with the end in mind (Rule 1). Have a plan...know what you want...and move the conversation in that direction.
- Avoid going up the ladder (Rule 2) and making assumptions until you have all the information to work with.
- Use a conflict style (Rule 3) that is best suited for getting win-win results.
• Take the initiative (Rule 4) to talk with the other party regardless of who is at fault or who is in the right or who is in the wrong.
• Focus on understanding the problem from their perspective first before expressing yours (Rule 5).
• Be prepared to ask for what you need (Rule 6) and to ask the other party for what they need from you.

In the end, it’s all about respect! It’s about how you feel in their presence during a confrontation and how they feel in your presence. If both of you feel respected, heard, acknowledged, and appreciated in the presence of each other, the what part of the conflict will be a slam dunk because you managed the how. The reverse is also true.

As I have mentioned before in this series (The Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict), the biggest key to effectively resolving conflict is preparation. When we have time to prepare, we do much better in resolving conflict than when it is thrust upon us and all we can do is react.

When I mediate conflicts, I include a preparation and coaching phase with both parties individually before I ever bring them together. This added phase is critical to a successful mediation, resulting in both parties being prepared, goal-focused, and ready for resolution.

Below is the two-step process I use for successfully mediating and resolving conflict between two people.

**Part I: The Preparation Phase**
The first step in the preparation phase is to conduct a thorough self-assessment on the conflict itself. Below are the questions I use to help conflicting parties think through the conflict and prepare for mediation. These self-reflection questions are also useful for the typical everyday conflicts and disagreements that we all face.

1. Is the conflict about an isolated event that shows little consistency with the rest of the relationship, or is it the latest in a series of conflicts revealing problems within the relationship as a whole?
2. Are my expectations realistic on how I think things need to be resolved?
3. Am I letting my expectations be shaped or distorted by other people not involved in the conflict?
4. Are my expectations taking into account the other party's needs, values, and constraints?
5. What have I done to contribute to the cause and perpetuation of the conflict?
6. What misperceptions might the other party have of me?
7. What misperceptions might I have of the other party?
8. What is it I need differently from the other party and what would that look like?
9. What am I willing to do for the other party to show my willingness to work through our issue?
10. What are some of the workable compromises I can come to the table with?

By using these questions to self-assess and prepare, parties in conflict can put their focus more towards obtaining resolution than fault-finding. Thinking through these questions also helps remove any unwarranted emotion that’s preventing moving forward in a logical manner.

Part II: The Conflict Resolution Process (Formal)

I'm calling this a "formal" process because it is to be used when both parties need a structured format, particularly in cases where the working relationship is strained. I also use the process below as my outline when mediating conflicts. Keep in mind, it can be customized to fit a variety of situations.

Step 1: The Face-to-Face Meeting

Opening
- Each party states their intentions / desired outcomes for the meeting.
- Each party acknowledges the importance of their working relationship with each other as well as the importance of reaching resolution.

Step 2: Defining Needs
- Party 1 defines the problem and the impact it is having on him/her.
- Party 2 summarizes what he/she heard.
- Party 2 defines the problem and the impact it is having on him/her.
- Party 1 summarizes what he/she heard.
- Party 1 describes what he/she needs from the other to correct the problem...and seeks agreement from Party 2.
- Party 2 describes what he/she needs from the other to correct the problem...and seeks agreement from Party 1.

Step 3: Additional Issues
- Both parties have an opportunity to raise any additional issues/concerns (following the format above).
Step 4: Summary & Wrap-Up

- Once all problems, concerns, and conflicting issues have been discussed and resolved, both parties summarize together what agreements were made.
- Both parties identify an agreed upon process to address and resolve any future conflicts/disagreements between each other.
- Both parties commit to a check-in time/date in the future to revisit the agreements and make any needed adjustments.

This format gives you an idea how the flow of the mediation should go. And all parts are essential elements, from the opening comments to setting a future check-in time between parties.

Some Final Thoughts

Probably the biggest reason why I've witnesses so many successful conflict mediations in my career is due in part to the amount of preparation that each party has been willing to put into the process. It makes my job a lot easier too because parties come to the table goal-focused towards resolution. All I have to do is provide some gentle guidance along the way.

I guess it comes down to this: If you value the relationship with the person you're in conflict with, then it's worth putting in a little extra time in the preparation phase before talking out the problem. It will not only benefit you and the other person's relationship in the long-run, but you'll also be role modeling to others what effective conflict resolution looks like. And isn't that how it should be!
Rule 8: Empower the Third Side

Christian called the group together. “Gather up everybody. There’s one more thing to take care of before dinner.”

We were all pretty exhausted after having just hiked for the better part of the day with 60-pound packs on. It was the fourth day of a ten-day Outward Bound trip in the Colorado Mountains and nobody was in the mood for another one of Christian’s team building activities.

“We’ve got a problem,” he began before correcting himself. “Actually, you have a problem.”

We all looked around at each other, wondering what was coming next.

He continued. “Jonathan and David have been going at each other for the past two days and it’s time this gets resolved.”

You’ve got to be kidding me! I thought. Why don’t you just tell the two of them to fix the problem? Why do the rest of us need to be a part of this!

Christian looked right at me, as if he could read my mind. “Greg, did you have a question?”

“Ah, well...no, not exactly,” I stammered, before taking a big breathe to regain my confidence. “Actually, I’m a little confused.”

“You’re wondering why I’m making this a group issue?” he inquired.

Before I could respond, Kelly, one of the nine other participants sitting in this makeshift tribal council circle, spoke up. “But isn’t it Jonathan and David’s responsibility to resolve their differences?”

“If they can, certainly. But when does it become a team issue Kelly?” asked Christian.

Both Jonathan and David were clearly uncomfortable being the focus of this conversation. Neither would look at each other, or the group for that matter.

“I guess if they can’t resolve it,” she said, as her voice faded away.

“I’m still unclear why that makes it a team issue?” I countered. “It’s an issue between the two of them, not us. Maybe I’m only speaking for myself, but I’m not really impacted by their relationship with each other.”
Half the group nodded with me while the other half looked stunned by what I just said. “I’m just being honest,” I added.

Christian welcomed the debate. “Let me ask you a question. When you are out in the wilderness together for eight days, how important is it for you to be a team?”

“Extremely,” shouted Valerie, another member of the group. “Our lives depend on it.”

Everyone nodded.

“Okay, and what would being a team look like?”

Jonathan raised his hand, deciding it was time to be a part of the conversation instead of the object of it. “We’d collaborate and problem-solve together, support each other, and help each other out.”

“And what about trust?” asked Christian.

Everyone answered at the same time before letting David have the floor. “All those things Jonathan mentioned create the trust.”

“I like that,” said Kelly.

Christian nodded. “So is it important for a team that needs to collaborate, problem-solve, provide support and trust each other to also handle their own conflict effectively?”

“Of course!” shouted the group.

“Then why in the hell aren’t you doing it?” retaliated Christian. “Jonathan and David have been bickering back and forth for two days now while the rest of you look away, as if it’s not your problem. Well I’ve got news for you...it is your problem. If two of your teammates are struggling, then all of you are struggling. Every one of you is a reflection of this team; and a team divided is not a team! It’s time to walk your talk. Let’s see the collaboration. Let’s see the problem solving. Let’s see the support and trust. Show me!”

I was totally blown away. Of course he’s right, I thought. How can we say we are a team when we can’t even address the dynamics within our team! We were living a lie and it was time to step up and be the team that we claimed to be.

The Third Side

What Christian was trying to instill in us that day was that conflict within a team is a team issue, regardless if the conflict itself doesn’t involve every member directly. It’s
what William Ury refers to as the *Third Side* of conflict. According to Ury, there’s more to conflict than *their side or your side; there’s the third side!* The third side is all the people who are impacted by the conflict, be it family members, friends, or colleagues.

Rarely is conflict an isolated event between two people or a group of people. As in the Outward Bound example, Jonathan and David’s conflict impacted the rest of the team. Specifically:

- It created tension that was felt by everyone
- It created a breakdown in communication between Jonathan and David which meant a breakdown in team communication
- It divided the team (those closest to David versus those closest to Jonathan)
- It revealed that the team values were inconsistent and not being applied in all situations

Until Christian’s intervention, we, as a team, disassociated ourselves from Jonathan and David’s conflict because we failed to realize both the impact it was having on us and the role we played in enabling the conflict to continue.

Ury believes that there is no middle ground for third siders and calls on them to rise and engage in the conflicts around them so that: 1) the people in the conflict realized the far-reaching impact their conflict is having on others, and 2) those impacted by the conflict, be it directly or indirectly, begin to hold the conflicting parties responsible and accountable to resolve their differences in a supportive and constructive manner.

The moment our Outward Bound team became involved in helping Jonathan and David resolve their difference, I vowed to myself to nip any future conflicts I might have in the butt in order to avoid requiring a team intervention. It was all the motivation I needed. This is why *Empowering the Third Side* is Rule 8 of my *Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict*. It’s a call to action, if you will, to the people in the conflicts and the people impacted by those conflicts. Third siders need to take an active role in defining the environment around them so that all conflicts, strife, and disagreements are addressed constructively and respectfully. After all, isn’t it time for the environment to define conflict instead of conflict defining the environment?